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BYZANTIUM BETWEEN EAST AND WEST AND THE ORIGINS OF HERALDRY¹

ROBERT OUSTERHOUT

In memory of Paul M. Mylonas (1915–2005), a gentleman and a scholar

A small capital now in the crypt of the church of St. Demetrius in Thessaloniki caught my attention several years ago. Cubic in form and slightly damaged, it has palmette leaves at the corners and along the abacus, but its four faces are individually detailed (Figs. 1–4).² One is decorated with the common monogram of the Palaiologos family set within a lobed octagon. Another monogram adorns the second face. Constructed around a cross, its reading is not entirely clear: it may be a personal name; it may be a title; it may be a combination of both. ‘O KAICAP is one possibility; the family name [Λ]ACKAPIC has also been suggested, although the necessary lambda is not represented; the personal name and title KOCTAN AP[XON] is another possible reading.³ On the third side appears a double-headed eagle, often interpreted as the heraldic emblem of the Byzantine state or of its ruling dynasty. On the fourth is a design like a gaming square, set within a lobed octagon similar to that surrounding the Palaiologos monogram.

Taken together, we have an imperial family name, a personal name and/or title, a heraldic-like image, and a gaming square — which in this context was certainly more than a decorative motif. The capital must have been part of a set — I suspect from a tomb monument — and was thus one of two or possibly four capitals, so it may not provide all the information once available. A fragment of an epistyle, now in the Museum of Byzantine Culture in Thessaloniki,

¹ I presented a version of this paper at the Gennadios Library in Athens in April 2005, shortly after the death of Paul M. Mylonas, who had been a caring mentor and a dear friend. I thank Maria Georgopoulou for the invitation to speak on that occasion and Scott Redford for his many helpful comments. An abbreviated version of the paper will appear in German as “Symbole der Macht: Mittelalterliche Heraldik zwischen Ost und West,” in *Lateinisch-griechisch-arabische Begegnungen: Kulturelle Diversität im Mittelmeerraum des Spätmittelalters*, ed. Margit Mersch and Ulrike Ritzerfeld (Berlin, 2009).

² Recently published by A. Tzitzibassi, “Monogramma Palaiologon se Glypta tes Thessalonikes,” *Mouseio Vyzantino Politismou* (Thessaloniki) 12 (2005): 81–97. The capital ΑΔ136 measures 24 x 24 cm x 18 cm tall, with a square echinus 14 x 14 cm.

³ Tzitzibassi, “Monogramma,” 88, reads the monogram as [L]askaris. Encouraging the reading ‘O KAICAP, a monastery *tou Kaisaros* is recorded in Thessalonike in the late 14th century; see R. Janin, *Les Églises et les monastères des grands centres byzantins* (Paris, 1975), 389.



Fig. 1: Thessalonike, Crypt of St. Demetrius, capital AA 136. Palaiologos monogram (*author*)



Fig. 2: Thessalonike, Crypt of St. Demetrius, capital AA 136. Monogram reading 'O KAICAP (?)' (*author*)



Fig. 3: Thessalonike, Crypt of St. Demetrius, capital AA 136. Double-headed eagle (*author*)



Fig. 4: Thessalonike, Crypt of St. Demetrius, capital AA 136. Gaming square device (*author*)

is quite similar and may have come from the same monument. Decorated with a Palaiologos monogram, a gaming square, and a ferocious beast, all set within a rinceau, the piece provides us with no additional clues.⁴

However incomplete, the combination of words and symbols is significant, for it reflects how the elites of the Late Byzantine period emphasized individual achievements, family lineage, and social exclusivity.⁵ The question I would like to ask in this paper is whether they ever systematically codified the expressions of individual identity and social status, as happened in the medieval West. Heraldry developed in Western Europe, beginning around the middle of the twelfth century, and by the thirteenth century coats of arms were displayed prominently in art, architecture, weaponry, and costume.⁶ Heraldry provided a readily interpreted system of symbols to represent familial and individual identity, and came to connote aspects of privileged social status, patronage, and ownership. The basic purpose of heraldry was personal identification — what Sir Anthony Wagner once called “conspicuous distinctiveness.”⁷

As a subject of scholarly inquiry, heraldry is at once obvious and elusive. Much of the often eccentric literature that addresses Western European heraldry is concerned with decipherment — that is, “cracking the code” of an increasingly complex system of visual images to identify the persons designated by specific coats of arms. The historical and social conditions under which heraldry emerged and was popularized have not received as much attention. That is to say, I believe we need to understand heraldry as one component in the development of a visual “language of power” for a society with an increasingly mobile elite that extended across medieval Europe and the Mediterranean.

Social conditions in twelfth-century Byzantium were in many ways similar to those in Western Europe. With the rise of the aristocracy, family identity became increasingly important, particularly in the circles of the Komnenian imperial court.⁸ To be sure, the same period witnessed growing contact between Byzantines and Western Europeans through trade, diplomacy, marriage alliances, and the Crusades. From these contacts came also the limited introduction of Western customs, ideas, and art, ranging from stained glass to trousers.⁹ Was there such a thing as Byzantine heraldry? That is, did the use of distinctive patterns and motifs employed as ornament by the Byzantine nobility carry the same messages of authority and individuality as those used by their contemporaries in Western Europe?

⁴ Tzitzibassi, “Monogramma,” passim, and fig. 11 (ΑΓ 730), suggests that these pieces may have come from a templon; note the similar use of the lobed octagon surrounding the gaming square.

⁵ P. Magdalino, “Byzantine Snobbery,” in *The Byzantine Aristocracy, IX to XIII Centuries*, ed. M. Angold, BAR International Series 221 (Oxford, 1984), 58–71.

⁶ I return here to a subject I first addressed in an unpublished paper entitled “Webs of Power and Images of Power,” presented at the 25th International Congress on Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo in 1985, and subsequently in “The Byzantine Heart,” *Zograf* 17 (1989): 36–44.

⁷ For a good general introduction to Western medieval heraldry and its basic bibliography, see Meredith Parsons Lillich, “Early Heraldry: How to Crack the Code,” *Gesta* 30 (1991): 41–47.

⁸ For this period and the rise of the family, see Paul Magdalino, *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos 1143–1180* (Cambridge, 1993).

⁹ For the stained glass, see most recently Francesca dell’Acqua, “The Stained Glass Windows from the Chora and the Pantokrator Monasteries: A Byzantine ‘Mystery’?”, in *Restoring Byzantium: The Kariye Camii and the Byzantine Institute Restoration*, ed. H. Klein and R. Ousterhout (New York, 2004), 68–77.

Certainly a visual language of power was to be found in Byzantium centuries earlier, evident on garments and luxury textiles.¹⁰ In the manuscript illuminations of the *Dogmatic Panopty*, for example, Alexios I Komnenos wears a purple robe decorated with golden stars, hearts, and palm trees.¹¹ A military saint from the Kosmosoteira at Pherrai, sometimes identified as Alexios, wears the same pattern, and the same textile appears as an altar cloth in the early twelfth-century mosaics in S. Marco.¹² Do these designs have a special meaning associated with Alexios or with the imperial family? Are they part of a general vocabulary of evocative visual images, or do they carry more specific meanings, as we associate with heraldry?

Under Manuel I Komnenos, Western chivalric practices were introduced into Byzantium. In jousts, where the participants' identities were obscured by armor, we might expect to find the use of identifying symbols. This is the standard explanation for the introduction of coats of arms among the crusaders.¹³ A lengthy *ekphrasis*, recently discussed by Henry Maguire and Lynn Jones, provides a detailed description of the garments worn by Manuel in such a joust as this.¹⁴ The Byzantine writer attributed particular meanings to the patterns and images; for example, the white eagles made of pearls on his red shoes indicate that the emperor is spotless like a pearl and high-flying like an eagle. But these are never explained as signs of family or individual.

By the Palaiologan period, one sees the images commonly associated with Western heraldry freely adopted by the elite families of Constantinople. By this time, however, Western heraldry was widely disseminated, and it had certainly been brought to Constantinople from a variety of sources: by the Latins of the Fourth Crusade; by the inhabitants of the trading colonies in the city; and by the well-born Europeans married into the imperial family. For example, roundels with rampant lions top the revetment in the Tarchaniotes family chapel at the Pammakaristos monastery in Constantinople, built ca. 1310 (fig. 6).¹⁵ The roundels appear immediately below the upper cornice, which bears a painted inscription honoring the deeds of the deceased. Similar to the shield images of the military saints just discussed, they are also nearly identical to roundels that decorated Latin tombs from Pera, just across the Golden Horn.¹⁶ That is to say, in the funerary monuments of Constantinople, identical motifs appear in both Byzantine and Western European contexts. The image of the rampant lion is, in fact, common in symbolic imagery across the Mediterranean and Western Europe. A crowned, rampant lion bearing a sword once appeared with the monograms of a Palaiologan ruler in the Marmara Sea

¹⁰ E.D. Maguire, "Cues for Heaven and Earth in Pictorial Detail," *Abstracts of the Byzantine Studies Conference* 12 (1986): 46.

¹¹ A. Cutler and J.-M. Spieser, *Byzance médiévale* (Paris, 1996), figs. 279–280.

¹² For Pherrai, see R. Ousterhout and Ch. Bakirtzis, *The Byzantine Monuments of the Evros/Meriç River Valley* (Thessaloniki, 2007), 71–72; for S. Marco, see O. Demus, *The Mosaic Decoration of S. Marco, Venice*, ed. H. Kessler (Chicago, 1988), pl. 13.

¹³ Helmut Nickel, "Heraldry," in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages* (New York, 1985), 6:172–77.

¹⁴ H. Maguire and L. Jones, "A Description of the Jousts of Manuel I Komnenos," *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 26 (2002): 104–48.

¹⁵ C. Mango, H. Belting, and D. Mouriki, *The Mosaics and Frescoes of St. Mary Pammakaristos (Fethiye Camii) at Istanbul* (Washington, DC, 1978), pls. 94–95.

¹⁶ S. Düll, "Unbekannte Denkmäler der Genuesen aus Galata," *Istanbuler Mitteilungen* 33 (1983): 225–38; 36 (1986): 245–56.



Fig. 5: Thessalonike, Museum of Byzantine Culture, epistyle ΑΓ 730. Main face of epistyle
(drawing: G. Marconi-Papadeli, by permission)



Fig. 6: Istanbul, Fethiye Camii (Theotokos Pammakaristos), parekklesion. Detail of marble revetment
(author)

Wall of Constantinople.¹⁷ Already in the twelfth century the rampant lion begins to appear on armor, as on St. Theodore's shield at the church of St. Panteleimon at Nerezi.¹⁸ It was also the most prominent image on the Lusignan coats of arms in Cyprus, as well as that of Richard the Lionheart of England, and a variety of others, so it would have a solid Western pedigree. At the same time, we also find it employed by the Byzantine nobility, and even on a signet ring of a

¹⁷ A. Van Millingen, *Byzantine Constantinople: The Walls of the City and Adjoining Historical Sites* (London, 1899), illus. on 189.

¹⁸ I. Sinkević, *The Church of St. Panteleimon at Nerezi* (Wiesbaden, 2000), fig. 62.

Byzantine court official, a certain fourteenth-century *sevastos vestiariou*, found in the sea near Monemvasia.¹⁹

Although we might describe the rampant lion as “heraldic,” for the Byzantine audience it connoted power and prestige only in a general way. For this and other emblems similar to Western European heraldic imagery, there is no evidence of a systematic usage — that is, there is nothing to suggest that they may have been bestowed by the ruler or codified according to person and family.

Discussion of Byzantine heraldry has focused on two insignia: the eagle, either single- or double-headed, and the cantoned cross with four betas.²⁰ The latter symbol appears on coinage as early as the reign of Theodore II Laskaris (1254–1258), later on the walls of Constantinople, at the Tekfur Saray Palace, and on maps and banners.²¹ The *Treatise on Dignities and Offices* attributed to Pseudo-Kodinos (ca. 1347–1368) refers to this device as “the usual imperial flamoulon, that is the cross with the flint-strikers” — suggesting the Bs may be symbols rather than letters.²² Scholars have suggested the Bs may be abbreviations for variations on the word *basileus*. This was taken by Westerners to be an imperial emblem: as early as the end of the thirteenth century the beta-cross was listed in the Wijnbergen Armorial (ca. 1265–1270) as the coat of arms of the emperor of Byzantium, “le roi de pariologre.”²³ But this image seems to have a more generalized meaning and was more likely associated with the empire or the city of Constantinople; to my knowledge it never appears on items of personal adornment, as might be expected if its meanings were individual or familial. It is also noteworthy that the double-headed eagle never appears on Byzantine coinage, while a number of other symbols do — including the beta-cross, the Palaiologos family monogram, and several others to be discussed below.

The single- and double-headed eagles are more problematic. Both appear from the late twelfth century onward in the decoration of buildings built by members of the imperial family, such as the single-headed eagle from the Theotokos Kosmosoteira at Pherrai, built by the Sebastokrator Isaakios Komnenos ca. 1152.²⁴ The double-headed eagle appears commonly throughout the Palaiologan period, as for example in a well-known plaque from the Metropolis of Mistra.²⁵ The Wijnbergen Armorial actually assigns the double-headed eagle to the king of Alexandria — that is, of the Mamluks.²⁶ Notably, the double-headed eagle appears on the ceremonial costumes of those closely associated with the emperor, but never on imperial gar-

¹⁹ E. Katsara, *The City of Mystras: Byzantine Hours: Works and Days in Byzantium* (Athens, 2001), 162–63.

²⁰ A. Solovjev, “Les emblèmes héraldiques de Byzance et les Slaves,” *Seminarium Kondakovianum* 7 (1935): 119–64. See more recently P. Androudis, “Origin et symbolique de l’aigle bicéphale des Turcs seldjoukides et artuquides de l’Asie Mineure,” *Byzantiaka* 19 (1999): 311–45; A. Babuin, “Standards and Insignia of Byzantium,” *Byzantion* 71 (2001): 5–59, esp. 36–38; and the paper by A. Cutler in this volume.

²¹ Van Millingen, *Byzantine Constantinople*, illus. on 112.

²² Pseudo-Kodinos, *De officiis (Traité des offices)*, ed. J. Verpeaux (Paris, 1866), 167.17–23.

²³ D. Cernovodeanu, “Contributions à l’étude de l’héraldique Byzantine et postbyzantine,” *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 32/2 (1982): 409–22, esp. 415 and n. 25; also No. 1274: <http://www.briantimms.com/wijnbergen/wnrois.htm>

²⁴ A.K. Orlandos, “Prosthekai eis ta peri tou Vyzantinou naou tes Thrakikes Vieras,” *Archeion Thrakikou Laographikou kai Glossikou Thesavrou* 6 (1939–1940): 500–3, and fig 3; see now Ousterhout and Bakirtzis, *Byzantine Monuments*, 62.

²⁵ S. Runciman, *Mistra: Byzantine Capital of the Peloponnese* (London, 1980), frontispiece.

²⁶ No. 1298: <http://www.briantimms.com/wijnbergen/wnrois.htm>

ments.²⁷ The emperor is always distinguished by his richly jeweled regalia. So for example, in the famous Athonite chrysobull of 1374, Alexius III of Trebizond wears purple and jewels, while his consort's garment is decorated with double-headed eagles.²⁸ In another manuscript, Manuel II is similarly dressed, as is the heir apparent, although his younger sons' garments are decorated with eagles.²⁹ The latter image, by the way, was included in a manuscript given as a gift to the royal abbey of St.-Denis in Paris, so it seems to have been addressed to a Western audience.³⁰ The same distinction was made in Bulgaria: in the Gospels of Ivan Alexander, the tsar wears jeweled robes while his son-in-law, the despot Konstantin, wears garments decorated with double-headed eagles.³¹

Occasionally a *souppedion* or cushion appears below the imperial feet, on which an eagle is represented, as in portraits of Michael VIII (with single-headed eagles) or Andronikos II (with double-headed eagles).³² John VI is similarly represented.³³ Sometime the eagle might climb as high as the imperial footwear, as for example the boots said to have been worn by Manuel I in the description of a joust.³⁴ And immediately after the fall of Constantinople, the corpse of the last emperor Constantine XI was identified by his purple shoes, decorated with golden double-headed eagles.³⁵ In the final analysis, the eagle should be identified as a generalized symbol of empire or perhaps of rulership, perhaps associated with apotheosis — an emblem of power and not of a specific person or family.

Like the beta-cross, the double-headed eagle was misunderstood in the West, and the representation was assumed to have heraldic value. The daughters of the Latin Emperor Baldwin I seem to have adopted it as such, and with the marriage of his daughter Jeanne to Thomas II of Savoy in 1237, the double-headed eagle was included in the arms of Savoy.³⁶

The inscriptions that decorate monuments associated with the Gattelusii family, Genoese freebooters who intermarried with the Palaiologoi, often added both the double-headed eagle and the beta-cross to the scale pattern of their own coat of arms, as well as the crowned eagle (perhaps a symbol of the Doria family), and the Palaiologos family monogram. In a plaque dated 1433 from a fortification tower in the village of Chora on Samothrace, for example, they were covering all bases with the selection of emblems (Fig. 7). Although the lengthy inscription

²⁷ G. Stričević, "The Double-Headed Eagle: An Imperial Emblem?" *Abstracts of the Byzantine Studies Conference* 5 (1979): 39–40.

²⁸ A. Cutler and J.W. Nesbitt, *Arte Bizantina e il suo pubblico* (Turin, 1986), 282; also see the paper by Cutler in this volume.

²⁹ *Byzantium: Faith and Power*, ed. H. Evans (New York, 2004), fig. 2.5.

³⁰ N. Necipoğlu, "Empire and Ideology in the Late Byzantine Era: Tradition, Transformation, and Innovation," in *The Kariye Camii Reconsidered*, ed. H. Klein, R. Ousterhout, and B. Pitarakis (Istanbul, 2009), forthcoming.

³¹ *Byzantium: Faith and Power*, 56–57, no. 27.

³² Stričević, "Double-Headed Eagle," attempts to associate the suppedion with the shield used in the ritual elevation of the emperor. For Andronikos II, see *To Vyzantio os Oikoumene* (Athens, 2001), no. 53.

³³ *Byzantium: Faith and Power*, figs. 1.5, 1.11.

³⁴ Maguire and Jones, "Description of the Jousts."

³⁵ Phrantzes, *Chronicon maius*, trans. M. Philippides (Amherst, MA, 1980), 428–32; D. Nicol, *The Immortal Emperor* (Cambridge, 1992), 86.

³⁶ Cernovodeanu, "Contributions à l'étude de l'héraldique byzantine," 413; G. Gerola, "L'aquila bizantina e l'aquila imperiale a due teste," *Felix Ravenna* 43 (1934): 7–36, at 24.



Fig. 7: Samothrace, Chora, Byzantine tower. Inscription of the Gattelusi dated 1433 (*author*)

is in Greek, its images were drawn from and understandable to two very different groups.³⁷ Elsewhere the Gattelusi inscriptions appear in both Greek and Latin; indeed, a second, quite similar plaque from Chora, dated 1431, bears similar imagery and an inscription in Latin. Both are signed by the same carver, who provided his name in Greek.³⁸ From the perspective of the Genoese, the appropriated Byzantine imagery must have been interpreted as bearing a heraldic meaning, comparable to that of their own familiar familial emblems. Because the Gattelusi ruled independently in the East, the Byzantine emblems must have been understood by them to mean family and not empire. Indeed, the frequent misunderstanding of these symbols — both historically and in modern scholarship — may have resulted from viewing them through the lens of the Western Middle Ages. In a recent assessment, A. Babuin concludes, “there is no iconographical evidence of the use of the two-headed eagle as the official device of the Byzantine State.”³⁹

Since Byzantine times, however, the double-headed eagle has been widely diffused throughout the Balkans, Europe, and Russia, and it is used today by the Greek Orthodox Church and even a few Greek football teams — but the association is with Constantinople, rather than with empire, family, or dynasty.

The Byzantine elite employed numerous other symbols of non-western origin in the last centuries. Unfortunately, although the symbols seem to have imperial associations, it is virtually impossible to fix any one symbol with a particular individual or a family. For example, the gaming square pattern, like that on the capital from Thessalonike, appeared on thirteenth-century coinage under John Doukas Vatatzes (1221–1254), and it continued to be used by the Palaiologan dynasty (Fig. 8).⁴⁰ The same device adorns the canon tables of a manuscript of a certain Palaiologan princess from the end of the thirteenth century, occupying on one page the

³⁷ F.W. Hasluck, “Monuments of the Gattelusi,” *Annual of the British School at Athens* 15 (1908–1909): 248–69; C. Asdracha and Ch. Bakirtzis, “Inscriptions byzantines de Thrace (VIIIe–XVe siècles): Edition et commentaire historique,” *Archaiologikon Deltion* 35 (1980/1986): Meletes, 241–82, here 273–76.

³⁸ Asdracha and Bakirtzis, “Inscriptions,” 271–73.

³⁹ Babuin, “Standards and Insignia,” 38.

⁴⁰ Michael Hendy, *Catalogue of the Byzantine Coins in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection and in the Whittemore Collection*, 4: *Alexius I to Michael VIII, 1081–1261* (Washington, DC, 1999), pl. XXXIV, AE 56.1; P. Grierson, *Byzantine Coins* (London, 1982), nos. 1175, 1449, 1451; Scott Redford, “The Islamic Influence on Heraldic Symbols in Byzantium,” *Abstracts of the Byzantine Studies Conference* 29 (2003): 26–27 notes some Islamic precedents for this motif.



Fig. 8: Coin of John III Doukas Vatatzes (*courtesy of the Dumbarton Oaks Collection*)

same position taken by a family monogram on another.⁴¹ An archivolt from Constantinople, perhaps from a funeral monument, has the device repeated twice and framing a Palaiologan monogram, set within a wreath-like roundel.⁴² A fourteenth-century tomb plaque originally from the Hypapante Chapel in the Pantanassa Monastery at Mistra has the same combination, although here the central monogram is that of the Kantakouzenos family (Fig. 9).⁴³ Palaiologan monograms and the gaming square device appear at the corners. It is tempting to read the gaming square as a variant of the Palaiologos monogram, or perhaps as a rotated pi, but, in fact, the symbol predates the dynasty and was used by at least three different imperial families.

A number of devices may be related to this one. On an early Palaiologan marble tomb slab from the Monastery *tou Libos* in Constantinople, perhaps that of the founder, the dowager empress Theodora, an emblem alternates with monograms and heraldic beasts, above the dedicatory inscription (Fig. 10).⁴⁴ The same insignia appear on a set of late Byzantine earrings from Mistra, where they alternate with Palaiologan monograms.⁴⁵ And we find the same on the gold ring of Constantine XI and Theodora, of ca. 1428, encircled by the inscription.⁴⁶ It also appears on the cloth beneath the icon of the Virgin in a scene illustrating the Akathistos Hymn from Dečani — the icon procession and the hymn have both imperial and Constantinopolitan associations.⁴⁷ Similarly, the symbol appears on an epitachelion now in Athens, where it is combined with a sort of cross-swastika and a fleur-de-lis, although this probably represents a post-

⁴¹ G. Vikan, Review of H. Buchta and H. Belting, *Patronage in Thirteenth-Century Constantinople: An Atelier of Late Byzantine Book Illumination and Calligraphy* (Washington, DC, 1978), *Art Bulletin* 63 (1981): 326.

⁴² C. Mango and E.J.W. Hawkins, "Additional Finds at Fenari Isa Camii," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 22 (1968): 181, n. 15.

⁴³ E. Bakourou, in *The City of Mystras*, 180–82.

⁴⁴ Mango and Hawkins, "Additional Finds," 181, and fig. A.

⁴⁵ Angelia Mexia, in *Byzantium: Faith and Power*, 47, and pl. 18, attempts to associate it with the beta-cross; eadem, in *The City of Mystras*, 166–67. A set of gold appliqué from Mistra bears a similar set of images, with rampant lion, double-headed eagle, cruciform device, and Palaiologos monogram; see P. Kalamara, in *Byzantium: Faith and Power*, 47, pl. 19.

⁴⁶ N. Saraga, in *To Vyzantio os Oikoumene*, 123.

⁴⁷ B. Todić, "Traditions et innovations dans le programme et l'iconographie des fresques de Dečani," in *Dečani et l'art byzantin au milieu du XIV^e siècle*, ed. V. Djurić (Belgrade, 1989), fig. 5. The Akathistos Hymn and the icon of the Virgin both had imperial associations; at Markov Monastery, the same image has roundels decorated with double-headed eagles, as noted below.

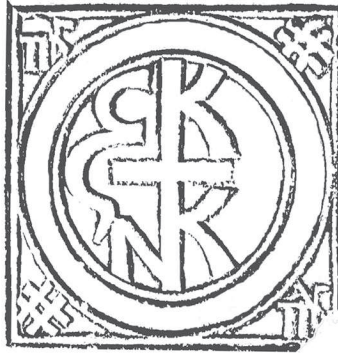


Fig. 9: Mistra Museum (originally Hypapante Chapel in the Pantanassa), no. 1772. funeral slab of Kantakouzenos Palaiologos. Detail of monogram, drawing (author)

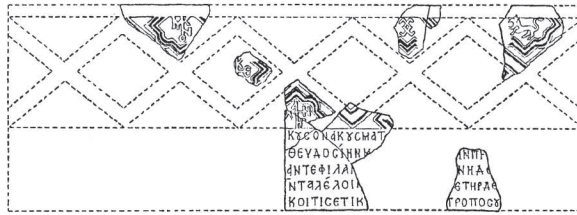


Fig. 10: Istanbul, Fenari İsa Camii (Theotokos tou Libos), funeral slab reconstructed. Drawing (courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Visual Resources)

Byzantine afterlife to the uses of symbols associated with authority.⁴⁸ Cross-swastikas also appear on the façade of the late fourteenth-century church of the Profitis Elias in Thessaloniki, which was probably an imperial foundation, in a position where one would expect to find the founder's monograms.⁴⁹

All of these devices appear on the *epitaphios* of the Moldavian princess Maria Mangop, dated 1476 (Fig. 11). The three devices are combined with Palaiologan monograms in the decorative arch that frames the head of the deceased, while roundels in the corners of the cloth contain double-headed eagles and additional monograms of the Palaiologos and Asanes families.⁵⁰ Surveying the contexts of these devices, Gary Vikan once interpreted them as “emblems of power and divinely bestowed protection.”⁵¹ While this explanation is no doubt correct, it does not explain why they appear in close association with, or virtually interchangeable with, monograms or monogram roundels — a point to which I shall return shortly.

The cross-swastika also appears prominently on the walls of two fortresses near Constantinople. At Eskihisar, near Gebze on the Sea of Marmara, the palace block within the fortress

⁴⁸ G. Millet, *Broderies religieuses de style byzantin* (Paris, 1947), pl. 51; I thank Warren Woodfin for his comments.

⁴⁹ Th. Papazotos, “The Identification of the Church of ‘Profitis Elias’ in Thessaloniki,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 45 (1991): 121–28; the founder's monograms appear in an analogous position on the west façade of the early fourteenth-century church of the Holy Apostles in Thessaloniki.

⁵⁰ A. Paunescu, in *Byzantium: Faith and Power*, 59 and pl. 29; Millet, *Broderies*, pl. 162.

⁵¹ Vikan, *Review of Patronage in Thirteenth-Century Constantinople*, 326.



Fig. 11: Epitaphios of Maria Mangop, Monastery of Putna (Romania). Detail, drawing (author)

features a variation of the Palaiologan monogram, a cross-swastika, and a triangular shield pattern—the last has lost its field.⁵² At Yoros Castle on the Bosphorus, the cross-swastika appears next to a heart pattern (which I have discussed elsewhere) and is set together with an illegible inscription and a triangular shield, its patterned surface now illegible.⁵³ At Yoros, these appear on an inner wall that separated the middle bailey from the upper bailey. While the fortress may be twelfth-century, the wall is more likely a Late Byzantine addition. At both castles, these images appear on surfaces facing interior courts, and thus were addressed to a Byzantine audience, perhaps meant to designate the social hierarchy within the fortresses.

Another symbol has a similar diffusion. The fleur-de-lis also appears on the coinage of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. On the coins of Theodore II (1254–1258), for example, it is associated with Hagios Tryphonos of Nicaea, and the lily here would seem to be an attribute of the saint, rather than a borrowing from the French royal family (Fig. 12).⁵⁴ Nevertheless, it is found in a variety of non-Tryphonian settings, such as on the coinage of Michael VIII Palaiologos and his successors.⁵⁵ At the Peribleptos in Mistra, it appears as an individual emblem, as well as in combination with rampant lions to surround the monogram of the church.⁵⁶ Although there may be Western influence here through the patron Isabella de Lusignan, a Western princess married to the Byzantine despot Manuel Kantakouzenos (1348–1380), the individual fleur-de-lis resembles more closely the image as it appears on Byzantine coinage than the French

⁵² C. Foss, *Survey of Medieval Castles in Anatolia, II: Nicomedia* (London, 1996), includes the castle at Eskihisar; also Ousterhout, “Byzantine Heart,” n. 22.

⁵³ S. Eyice, *Bizans Devrinde Boğaziçi* (Istanbul, 1976), 72–92, figs. 115–116; Ousterhout, “Byzantine Heart,” 42–43.

⁵⁴ Hendy, *Catalogue*, 4: pl. XXXVI, 13b; see also Grierson, *Byzantine Coins*, nos. 1184, 1191.

⁵⁵ Grierson, *Byzantine Coins*, no. 1383; Ousterhout, “Byzantine Heart,” 38–39, figs. 6–7.

⁵⁶ *The City of Mystras*, figs. 174–175. The individual fleur-de-lis is curiously similar to that on the coin of Michael VIII.



Fig. 12: Coin of Theodore II Laskaris
(Whittemore collection, Harvard Art Museum; photo courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks)

version. Unusually, the combination of monogram roundel and heraldic imagery here is used to glorify the monastery and not an individual.

One common setting for this sort of emblem is the tomb, where the earthly achievements of prominent individuals could be glorified in word and image. Marble carvings discussed above from Mistra, Constantinople, and Thessalonike seem to have originally decorated tombs. Although Tzitzibassi suggested that the Thessalonike pieces came from a templon, the glorification of the individual would be more appropriate in the context of a burial.⁵⁷ Similarly, garments of the aristocracy in their funeral portraits were often adorned with a rich array of heraldic imagery. In Tomb E at the Chora Monastery in Constantinople, the deceased and her family appear in garments resplendent with fleurs-de-lis, eagles, lions, shields, crowns, and hearts, all accompanying monogram roundels.⁵⁸ Here the insignia occupy a secondary position, while the larger monograms establish the specific identity of the individual. Indeed, this is the case in most Byzantine “heraldic” imagery — the emblem is secondary to something else that provides specificity: a portrait or an inscription (as was common on coinage), or a monogram. Indeed, it is unusual to find these signs without one or more accompanying monograms.

It is with the use of the monogram that the Byzantines most closely approximate Western heraldry. Monograms appear prominently on Byzantine coinage, seals, architecture, art, dress, and objects of personal adornment.⁵⁹ Moreover, just as arms were impaled in the West to represent a family union, so Byzantine monograms are conjoined, and through the proper reading, it is still possible for us to identify the bearer. Thus, for example, the main occupant of the tomb at the Chora may be identified as Eirene Raoulina Palaiologina (d. 1332), daughter of Michael VIII, from the combination of Asan, Raoul, and Palaiologos monograms that decorate her garments (Fig. 13).⁶⁰ The familial associations are quite literally spelled out.

This is, I believe, an important point. Unlike the western code, based on pictorial images or decorative patterns, the emblems of Byzantine distinctiveness were based on the written word. This might be a reflection of the importance of literacy as an indicator of social status among the Byzantine aristocracy; one recalls the insistence on seemingly redundant inscriptions in all

⁵⁷ Tzitzibassi, “Monogramma,” *passim*.

⁵⁸ P.A. Underwood, *The Kariye Djami*, 3 vols. (New York, 1966–1975), 1: 280–88; 3: pls. 450–451.

⁵⁹ W. Hörandner, “Monogram,” in *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (Oxford, 1991), 2: 1397–98.

⁶⁰ Underwood, *Kariye Djami*, 1: 284–86; 3: pl. 541.

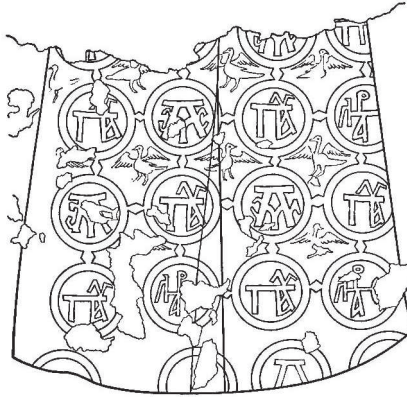


Fig. 13: Istanbul, Kariye Museum (Monastery of the Chora), Tomb E. Detail of the garments of Eirene Raoulina Palaiologina, drawing (courtesy of *Dumbarton Oaks Visual Resources*)

forms of Byzantine art. Perhaps also, in a manner similar to that of the inscriptions on icons, the written word could add authority and validation in a secular context. Other symbols may augment the meaning of — or sometimes stand in for — the monogram, but the system of pictorial symbols was never codified, while they never acquired the specificity of the monogram. The fact that the monogram was used similarly to — and in the Palaiologan period, perhaps, in response to — Western heraldry helps to explain why heraldic imagery so often accompanies late Byzantine monograms. Taken together, they would have both the specificity and the distinction of Western heraldry.

But the Byzantines weren't just looking to the West. In several recent papers, Scott Redford has pointed to a similar usage of symbolic imagery among the Seljuks and Mamluks to denote social status.⁶¹ He suggests that the encounter of the crusaders with the chivalric practices of their Islamic foes played an instrumental role in the development of European heraldry. He posits, "this symbolic/emblematic language of power passed to western Europe beginning in the early twelfth century as a result of the Crusades, where it evolved into the genealogical system we know as heraldry."⁶² At the same time, as Redford emphasizes, the usage of insignia in the Islamic world more closely parallels the manner in which these symbols were used in Byzantium than in the West, and Byzantium was clearly involved in the broad cultural encounters of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Thus, turning our gaze eastward, rather than westward, may help to refine our interpretation of Byzantine practices.

Scholars have long been aware that the double-headed eagle appears in identical situations in both Seljuk and Byzantine usage, although its point of origin is unclear. In Seljuk art the double-headed eagle was the personal emblem of Ala al-Din Kai-Qubadh, perhaps also the armorial badge of the city of Diyarbakır, although it is clearly older.⁶³ Perhaps developing

⁶¹ Redford, "Islamic Influence," 26–27; idem, "Byzantium and the Islamic World, 1261–1557," in *Byzantium: Faith and Power*, 388–96; idem, "A Grammar of Rum Seljuk Ornament," *Mesogeios* 25–26 (2005): 283–310. Among other literature, see also L.A. Mayer, *Saracenic Heraldry* (Oxford, 1933).

⁶² Redford, "Grammar," 288.

⁶³ Redford, "Grammar," 291; also *Byzantium: Faith and Power*, 397, no. 243; for an earlier appearance of the image from Stara Zagora in Bulgarian art, see *The Glory of Byzantium*, ed. H.C. Evans and W.D. Wixom (New York, 1997),

from the symmetry of weaving, examples appear in stone by the mid-thirteenth century in the monuments of Konya and Erzurum, and the glazed tiles from palaces at Alanya and Kubadabad.⁶⁴ Redford notes other symbols, including the *çintamani* or three balls set into a triangular arrangement, which figured prominently in early Ottoman costume and were clearly associated with rulership in the Islamic world. Ruy Gonzales de Clavijo (ca. 1404) noted that it was the special armorial bearing of Tamurlane in Samarkand.⁶⁵ The same pattern appears prominently on a variety of royal garments in the Late Byzantine Balkans, and the three balls occasionally appear on Byzantine coinage, as on anonymous Lascarid coin.⁶⁶ Jaroslav Folda has found the same pattern on a variety of Crusader artworks, which he associates with Crusader-Mongol contact.⁶⁷

The possible association of Byzantine and Islamic imagery is intriguing, but, as in the cases of similarities with Western heraldic motifs, it is never a matter of influences flowing one way or the other, but more of a cross-fertilization. For the Byzantines, emblematic images were usually combined with writing, often in the form of the monogram. As Redford notes, "Alphabets, after all, are graphic systems and their combination with other visual symbolic systems is . . . one of the characteristics of the medieval eastern Islamic world and the Rum Seljuk dynasty as part of that world."⁶⁸ For example, the use of the *tuğra* among medieval Islamic states as a personal and dynastic monogram parallels Byzantine usage. We also witness the adoption of symbols common in Byzantium in Islamic contexts, as in the early fifteenth-century manuscript images of the wedding of Mehmet II. The bride Sitt Hatun appears exotically seated on a stage-like platform on the back of an elephant. The curtain hanging behind her is decorated with the gaming squares familiar from Byzantine imperial insignia. On the facing page, her brother appears in Turkish fashion, but his garments are decorated with double-headed eagles. Images of power and authority would appear to be derived from both cultures. It is perhaps noteworthy that both Mehmet's mother and the artist of the manuscript were Byzantines, and the cultural hybridity of the early Ottoman period has been often noted.⁶⁹

The variety of possible Islamic connections allows us to discuss the development of heraldry in a considerably broader context. Byzantium, of course, stood between East and West, and in its diplomacy as well as in its artistic culture, it looked both ways. Simple devices like the gaming square parallel the sorts of emblems that appear in Seljuk ornament. One wonders if

326–27, and no. 220B.

⁶⁴ *Byzantium: Faith and Power*, 397, for other examples and additional bibliography.

⁶⁵ Redford, "Byzantium and the Islamic World," 393–95.

⁶⁶ Grierson, *Byzantine Coins*, no. 1152. The imperial figure in the illustrations of the Akathistos Hymn at Markov Manastir has this pattern on his garments, while the cloth beneath the icon of the Virgin features double-headed eagles; see A. Pätzold, *Der Akathistos-Hymnos* (Stuttgart, 1989), fig. 113. The same detail appears on the robe of Stefan Nemanja at Dečani; see *To Vyzantio os Oikoumene*, fig. 47.

⁶⁷ J. Folda, "Crusader Artistic Interactions with the Mongols in the Thirteenth Century: Figural Imagery, Weapons, and the Çintamani Design," in *Interactions: Artistic Exchange between the Eastern and Western Worlds in the Medieval Period*, ed. C. Hourihane (University Park, PA, 2007), 147–66.

⁶⁸ Redford, "Grammar," 285.

⁶⁹ Julian Raby, "El Gran Turco: Mehmed the Conqueror as a Patron of the Arts of Christendom" (D. Phil. diss., Oxford University, 1980); also Çiğdem Kafescioğlu, *Constantinopolis/Istanbul* (in press); based on eadem, "The Ottoman Capital in the Making: The Reconstruction of Constantinople in the Fifteenth Century" (Ph.D. diss. Harvard University, 1996).

the Byzantines adopted Anatolian tribal symbols that are no longer preserved in their original contexts, or if they had developed their own parallel symbolic vocabulary.

Clearly, Western Europeans viewed the Seljuk usage of these emblems as meaningful. For example, in the illustrated Crusader chronicles of Godefroi de Bouillon, the army of Saladin is depicted with distinctively decorated garments and arms. The European illuminator may have been a bit creative, but the Crusader commentaries make it clear that the Ayyubids and Mamluks understood such devices as these to be meaningful.⁷⁰ The famous beaker of Baybars is decorated with the image of a lion, similar to those employed in the Byzantine and Western vocabulary.⁷¹ The various Islamic insignia also make me wonder about the meaning of the heraldic-like imagery on the unique, twelfth-century floor of the church of Christ Pantokrator, with its imperial overtones (Fig. 14). Could this example of Byzantine proto-heraldry have been created in response to John II Komnenos's encounters with the Seljuks and their language of images?⁷²

By the fifteenth century, the Byzantine symbolic language seems to have been understood in heraldic terms. When the Spanish traveler Pero Tafur met John VIII in Constantinople in the 1430s, they discussed heraldry. Tafur claimed relationship with the imperial family, and thus noted, "And if I carry bars on my escutcheon, it is because by marriages the descent has become confused, but the true arms are checky (*jaqueles*)."⁷³ He enquired why the emperor did not wear those arms, as was formerly the custom, and was told that the emperor who had reconquered Constantinople from the Venetians

... could never be prevailed upon to relinquish the arms which he formerly bore, which were and are two links joined (*eslavones asidos unos con otros*), and to assume the imperial arms, which belong to the throne. But he replied always that he had won the empire bearing those arms, and nothing would induce him to part with them, and so it is to this day. Nevertheless the old arms, which were checky, can still be seen on the towers and buildings and the churches of the city, and when people put up their own buildings, they still place the old arms upon them. I insisted, as best I could, that the emperors should still wear those arms, since they are the real arms of the empire. Further, that it is the office which gives the authority, and not the person who restored it, especially since the people recovered the city and made him their lord.⁷⁴

As Ruth Macrides has suggested to me, the gaming square or lattice pattern may be the "checky" device, while the betas or beta-cross may be the two links joined. Nevertheless, how much Byzantine history the emperor knew (or Tafur puts in his mouth) is questionable, for he is vague about dates: he says that the Latin conquest happened "some hundred or hundred and fifty years ago, or more," and he does not provide a name for the emperor of the story. If there is any

⁷⁰ Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms.fr. 22495, fol. 229: Army of Saladin, from the *Roman de Godefroi de Bouillon*, 1337.

⁷¹ W. Leaf and S. Purcell, *Heraldic Symbols: Islamic Insignia and Western Heraldry* (London, 1986), 62–64, and pl. 7.

⁷² R. Ousterhout, "Architecture, Art, and Komnenian Ideology at the Pantokrator Monastery," in *Byzantine Constantinople: Monuments, Topography, and Everyday Life*, ed. N. Necipoğlu (Leiden, 2001), 133–50.

⁷³ *Pero Tafur: Travels and Adventures (1435–39)*, trans. and ed. M. Letts (London, 1926), chap. 14. I thank Ruth Macrides for bringing this passage to my attention and for her pithy observations.

⁷⁴ *Pero Tafur*, chap. 14.

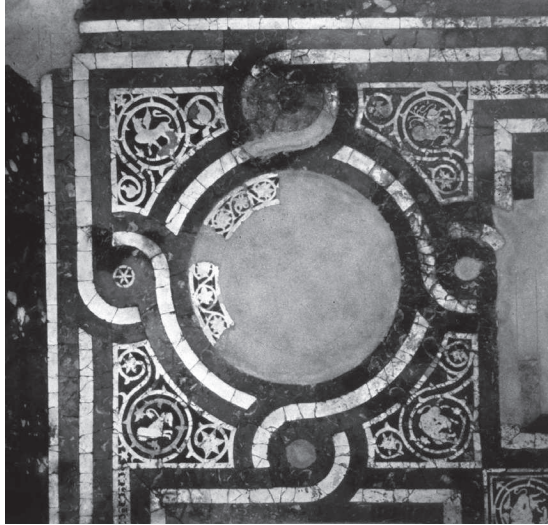


Fig. 14: Istanbul, Zeyrek Camii (Christ Pantokrator), south church. Opus sectile floor, detail
(photo courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Visual Resources)

truth to what Tafur credits John VIII with saying, we might associate the gaming square with the imperial office, and the beta-cross with Michael VIII in particular or the Palaiologos family in general. More likely, however, the devices had only general meanings of power and prestige when they first appeared, but from regular and repeated contact with the Western elite, they gradually took on more specific meanings.

To conclude, the development of vocabularies of insignia connoting power and status seems to have had its origins in the special conditions of cultural interaction in the medieval Mediterranean during the twelfth century, when Westerners, Byzantines, and Muslims came together in the cultural, military, and diplomatic encounters we know as the Crusades. Within certain social groups, these signs came to connote familial and individual identity. More importantly, they spoke of prestige and status in a language of power that was able to cross cultural and linguistic boundaries. As William Tronzo has underscored in his discussion of the court of Norman Sicily, in a multi-lingual society, the visual, the language of images, may be the common tongue.⁷⁵ Similarly, Scott Redford has emphasized the development of a readily understood *koine* in the artistic language of the Eastern Mediterranean.⁷⁶ Images could communicate to convey messages across boundaries — linguistic, ethnic, and national. This is something that became increasingly necessary in the complex, changing political landscape of the eastern Mediterranean in the period of the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries.

Several years ago I examined the similarities in the planning of ceremonial halls and façade articulation which Byzantine mansions share with the palatial architecture of the

⁷⁵ William Tronzo, *The Cultures of His Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo* (Princeton, 1997). See also Karla Mallette, *The Kingdom of Sicily, 1100–1250: A Literary History*. (Philadelphia, 2005).

⁷⁶ Redford, “Grammar,” 294.

Islamic world, as well as with monuments of Venice and the West.⁷⁷ Colonnaded, multi-storied façades characterize the palaces of both Venetian and Persian style, of the Umayyads and the Palaiologues, and somewhere in between they are reflected in the rock-cut mansions of Cappadocia. Considering the level of cultural interchange across the medieval Mediterranean, I suggested that a sort of architectural *lingua franca* had developed among the powerful. As has been emphasized in the shared tastes for lavish court ceremonial, luxury goods, textiles, and even ceramic production, it would seem that forms associated with prestige art and architecture were recognizable and similar across the region.⁷⁸ In fact, rather than speaking about artistic borrowings and appropriations, it may be more correct to speak of the development of a common “language of power” among the mobile Mediterranean elite.

This is, I believe, exactly what we see developing in the increasingly complex visual language of signs, symbols, and insignia that in Western Europe developed into what we call heraldry. Where this visual language originated may be less significant than how it came to be used in a cross-cultural context. It may not be completely correct to call it heraldry in its Byzantine or Islamic usage, but we lack a better term. What is clear, however, is that the language of the visual was able to communicate across linguistic and national frontiers and that it played a key role in both cultural encounters and the negotiation of differences. For the Byzantines, it formed a part of what made the elite conspicuous *and* distinctive — both to themselves and to others.

⁷⁷ R. Ousterhout, “The Ecumenical Character of Byzantine Architecture: The View from Cappadocia,” in *To Byzantium or Oikoumene*, (Athens, 2005), 211–32.

⁷⁸ A point also emphasized by S. Redford, *Landscape and the State in Medieval Anatolia: Seljuk Gardens and Pavilions of Alanya, Turkey* (Oxford, 2000), 87–90.